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ABSTRACT

The English Department and the composition class are mired in the trappings of Romanticism. Romanticism ingratiates itself, mostly in infatuation with the writing process, but with some other fetishes as well. The "whitecentric" character of that Romanticism imbues instruction; it is not just innocuous and "old hat," but really damaging. Students are asked to organize essays into orderly units that are as totalitarian as Romanticism can be. The thesis mandated is as overarching, as imposing, and as obscuring as that dark sycamore in "Tintern Abbey," from under which the poet speaks. Maybe teachers of composition need to be radically quiescent and not consciously hand down what they know, but encourage their students to render representations from under their own brands of lexical arbors. (CR)

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Under the Dark Sycamore

Patricia Cherin

Paper presented at the 1994 Conference on College Composition and Communication

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What I'm going to say right now is so assumed that it's usually shipped off to the memory banks in Siberia. But here it is. And that is that what we assert today is just one of a whole bunch of ways that we could talk about Romanticism. For what I'm about to say, this is my apology to the Romanticism of the French Revolution and to the one that can solicit renegade imaginings.

Caveat performed, what we're exploring today is how the English Department and the Composition class are mired in the trappings of Romanticism. I want to talk a little about how that Romanticism ingratiates itself, mostly in our infatuation with the writing process, but with some of our other fetishes as well. And then I'd like to look at the whitecentric character of that Romanticism that so imbues our instruction, to remind myself once again, that this Romanticism is not just innocuous and old hat, but that it is really damaging. This is the Romanticism that naturalizes transcendence, and a very ordained form of that.

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The writing process we peddle is Romantically rigged. What are our heuristics, clustering, brainstorming, freewriting, and the like but a means to coax "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings," which Wordsworth is his Preface tells us is the way that successful composition generally begins?

After our students have been smote with this requisite barrage of feeling, we ask them that they organize an essay into orderly units that are as totalitarian as Romanticism itself can be. The thesis that we mandate is as overarching and as imposing and as obscuring as that dark sycamore tree in "Tintern Abbey," from under which the poet speaks. (If we taught this surveilling agent as an idea or as an available organizing device it would be fine, but we don't.) In an academically appropriate essay, the kind we teach, although this monitor may convey conjecture, the fact of it itself is immutable. Isn't it Romantic?, to Rodgers and Hart and to those of us in the English Department alike, that that dark sycamore tree, that vaulting arbor, can encompass the means of emotional and aesthetic and political inscription of each one of us.

Overlooking Tintern Abbey from under that "dark sycamore," the reposing poet "view[s]/ These plots of cottage ground,/ these orchard tufts/ Which at this season, with their unripe fruits/ Are clad in one green hue." Those cottage grounds are certainly tilled and cultivated; Romanticism is indeed well-kept. "This

season" accords to what will become Greenwich Mean Time; the "plots of...ground" are British soli; the "one green hue" is a totalizing bucolic anglican pastoralism. It is the order of nineteenth century British bucolic life, and the inheritor of that appointed ne-classicism which precedes it.

In the "Preface," Wordsworth praises the language of common speech, that spoken by those who "are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature." Although Wordsworth extended the prevailing aesthetic class-wise, by Romanticism's own promotion of itself as encompassing, codification followed. Internal canons, and I think of Wordsworth's "thoughts of more deep seclusion," are much more insidious than any list of E. D. Hirsch. This fine advocacy of the "very language of men," prescient and progressive in its time, was still the speech of those for whom English was the primary language, still L1 to Composition theorists. And its speakers, from "humble and rustic life," were those who practiced what we might call C1, primary culture, British culture. The King's English could now accommodate the language of the King's subjects, at least those subjects on the British isle.

Wordsworth's rustic is white. Michael "Upon the forest side in Grassmere Vale" is white, and the Romantic shepherd ensconced in vaporous mists is white. That the common person is a subject and that his talk is a means of story in Romanticism was revolutionary, but nothing is more staid than a radical system

two centuries old. This white other became the romantically acceptable stranger. The "other," in our dearest and most condescending Romantic imaginings, is white. And it is this caricature--white, British, lower class, nearly 2 centuries old, that we drag in to our current teaching practice as our default "other." (The old guy is pretty hoary by now.) If we imagine within the parameters of Romanticism, our baseline Rustic is white.

We count very much in composition on a Romantic parousia, a gathering of thoughts from under the dark sycamore, and we don't often enough acknowledge that as those ideas come together, we inject ourselves yet again and academicize our students at the same time with a bolus, that's a horse-size dose, of Romantic transcendence. We Doctors of Philosophy are very proficient at performing academectomies.

Maybe we teachers of composition need to be radically quiescent. Or maybe we need to operate on ourselves, to perform a Romantic aphasia that might staunch that overflow of cultivated feeling that impels us still to perform the Whie Man's Burden. Perhaps we need consciously not to hand down what we know, the deciduous Romanticism from the dark sycamore. The lands my students have known are planted with or deforested of ginko trees from China, or acacia trees from Kenya, or a botanical variety that I don't know, or burned down and gouged out palm tree stumps from South Central. These writers need to be able to render representations

from under their brands of lexical arbors..., and not those models of the Wye River Valley and the Lake District.